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Inman warns on '90s intelligence

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SAN FRANCISCO — US intelligence operations have a "long way to go." If the main problem in the next decade turns out to be worldwide instability, not just Soviet activity in Europe and Asia, the outgoing deputy director of the CIA said yesterday.

In a speech to the American Newspaper Publishers Assn., Adm. Bobby R. Inman, the deputy director, said US intelligence is "marginal" for the threats that will arise in the late 1980s and 1990s.

If the nation's primary problem is dealing with the Soviet Union in Europe and Asia, "then you can relax about the current capabilities of the US intelligence community," Inman said.

"If you happen to share my view that you're more likely to find ... great difficulties in competition for raw materials, natural resources, markets, dealing with instability in many areas of the world,

trying to cope with the fervor of religious movements, then we have a very long way to go," he said.

The career intelligence and military official delivered what he called "the Inman report card" on intelligence capabilities, nearly a week after he announced he was resigning to enter private business.

Inman, 51, said he was quitting because he had "lost any zest ... for bureaucratic problems," not because of major policy disputes. He said there had been "disagreements" with William Casey, the director of central intelligence, but described their overall relationship as "very good."

John N. McMahon, nominated to succeed Inman, is a "super guy," Inman told reporters after his speech.

Summing up the nation's intelligence capabilities, Inman said warning systems about attacks from principal adversaries are "better than they have ever been."

"We do substantially less well in political and economic areas" and "very poorly" in the "basic encyclopedic data base" on which national security and foreign policy decisions rely, he said.

A long-range program to rebuild intelligence capabilities, now moving through Congress, would provide the United States with "the quality of intelligence that it needs," he said.

He said that amending the Freedom of Information Act to exclude the CIA and making it a felony to reveal the identity of US intelligence agents, even from public sources, would help intelligence operations.

A bill by Sen. John Chafee (R-R.I.) would exempt the CIA from disclosing information except for a first-person request for records on an individual.

Excluding the CIA from the Freedom of Information Act would be "much more reassuring to our foreign friends," said Inman.